

Foreign State Influence and Somalia's 2017 Presidential Election: An Analysis

Brendon J. Cannon

I. Introduction

Somalia's 2017 presidential election was billed as an opportunity for hope in a country that has not had a viable government able to broadcast power across the country for over 25 years. Though it was far from the one person, one vote election initially promised – reportedly on account of the parlous security situation - it did produce unexpected and (to some) welcome results.¹ The victory of Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, known popularly as “Farmajo”, was welcomed with dancing and demonstrations of pleasure from the streets of Mogadishu's to Jijiga in neighboring Ethiopia and Garissa in next-door Kenya. Farmajo's populist rhetoric, sprinkled with anti-Ethiopian invective and promises for jobs and peace in Somalia resonated with a number of Somali citizens. Yet Somalia's election results also demonstrated structural factors that are potentially less welcome – factors that Farmajo and his allies appear to have been influenced by and were able to exploit. First, Somalia's recent election, particularly the run-up to the election finally held in February 2017 (after multiple postponements), demonstrated the number of foreign actors with a stake in Somalia's future is growing and changing as is the amount of foreign influence and its limits in Somali politics. Second, the election showed just how reviled and discredited the previous presidential administration of Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud had become. Third, the results display the amount of foreign influence in Somali domestic politics and therefore the limits of Farmajo's (or any other SFG president's) mandate, to

include the ability to chart a truly independent policy agenda. Fourth, the elections demonstrated that foreign money exercised a critical factor in electoral success, but that the choice of candidate was in some senses predicated by the demands of the “Somali street.”

II. Background

In mid-2016, a vote resulting in the election of a relative outsider as president of the Somalia Federal Government (SFG) appeared next to impossible. In this not-so-distant past, all bets were that then-President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was almost certain to win. This was not necessarily because he had been a particularly able or effective leader. Indeed, the rosy prognostications that accompanied his election in 2012 largely came to naught.² Nor was Hassan Sheikh popular. Rather, the money was on him because he had proved particularly adept in exploiting and expanding the levers of power and reach of state intimidation at his disposal. Additionally, Hassan Sheikh was able to rely on the firm political and financial support of key foreign backers as well as exploit the fact that his major electoral opponents were themselves weak, discredited or both. Indeed, if the election had been held as initially scheduled in mid-2017, Hassan Sheikh would have almost certainly been reelected for six reasons:

1. Lack of credible or viable opposition candidates
2. The size of Hassan Sheikh's election war chest
3. Hassan Sheikh's ability to broadcast power through the use of force and intimidation
4. Hassan Sheikh's financial support from Turkey, financial and political support from the UK, and political support from Ethiopia
5. Clumsy political machinations of various states or their corresponding inability to locate a viable opposition candidate acceptable to the “Somali street”
6. A neutral or disinterested United States

In the lead up to the election, one article reported, “More than 20 presidential hopefuls are running. Analysts contend that President [Hassan Sheikh] Mohamud has a good chance of keeping his office because he has received millions of dollars from Turkey and the United Arab Emirates to buy enough votes from the Parliament members who will

vote for a new president. Turkey, the analysts said, has invested millions in Mogadishu's port and airport."³ Additionally, "... the Emirates and Qatar are backing different candidates here in a rivalry over the Muslim Brotherhood, while Egypt and Ethiopia are supporting different candidates because of their duel over the Nile."⁴ While capturing the complexity and number of international actors, the analysis simplified and therefore misconstrued the true fault lines and rivalries at play in Somalia's presidential election.

This article focuses on six states which attempted to influence the outcome of the 2017 Somalia presidential elections, only one of which is located in the Horn of Africa. Additionally, the article mentions the role of the United States of America (US), but only insofar as it remained a disinterested actor with the potential to have played a significant role had the domestic situation in the US been different. Importantly, for reasons of time and space, this article does not broach the role played by major international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) or bodies within the UN such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), all of which continue to be powerful political and economic actors in Somalia. It also does not take into account the relatively important military and political role of Kenya given uncertainty over Nairobi's true interests vis-à-vis the 2017 presidential candidates. Lastly, it only briefly mentions formerly powerful political actors in Somalia such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia which appear, for the time being, to have shifted their focus elsewhere; Egypt to its internal political situation and Saudi Arabia to Yemen and its domestic situation.

This article subscribes to the oft-proved theory that states have interests and those generally revolve around power, both the projection of power as well as the maintenance thereof; its loss and/or gain. A necessary follow-on to this is the idea that states often intervene in the affairs of other states in order to balance or hedge their interests and, ideally, to gain power and influence within that state. The list of states attempting to influence the outcome of elections, democratic or not, ranges from the United States in Chile in 1964, to Russia in the 2016 US elections, to Qatar in Egypt's 2011 Arab Spring revolution and the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohammed Morsi as president in 2012. Various schools of international relations thought attempt to explain the motivation for external involvement in elections in vastly different ways.⁵ For some, it is driven simply by

an attempt to gain influence within that state as a means of increasing power relative to other external actors. Others, however, point to more ideational motives, such as preference for the political stance of a particular candidate. This was likely the case in Qatar's and Turkey's overt support for Mohammed Morsi in Egypt during his brief tenure. Which side an external actor chooses to support is unlikely to be devoid of self-interest, even if assistance is veiled in the language of democracy promotion. The case of US involvement in Nicaragua in 2006 is instructive, for example. When states choose to engage in such behavior and when is the subject of much debate. However, what is not in question is that states do engage in this behavior.

In the case of Somalia's presidential election, the plethora of state actors attempting to influence it sets it apart from say US engagement in Chile or Russian attempts to influence the US elections. A second differentiator is the fact that the most influential actors turned out to be small or medium rising powers such as Turkey, the UAE or Qatar. Thirdly, these states' actions tended to displace or usurp the influential roles played by other small-to-medium powers such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which had held sway in Somalia since the 1970s. Lastly, states such as Turkey and Qatar played roles that displaced arguably more powerful actors with a longer history of engagement in Somalia such as the US and the UK. However, this is not necessarily indicative of long-term change and was more the result of disinterest or lack of salience of this election in Washington DC and, to a lesser degree, in London, as discussed in greater detail below.

What is important to understand prior to a discussion of external actors and their role and rationale for influencing the election is that their engagement in Somalia may be viewed, for the most part, from the vantage point of emerging power diplomacy. Diplomacy and recognition play central roles in the conventional conferral of state legitimacy and functioning of the inter-state system. They focus on sovereignty and legitimacy; the diplomatic relationships fostered as well as the institutions of diplomacy constructed; and the strategic position of such diplomacy vis-à-vis the conventional state-system.⁶ Andrew Cooper and Dennis Flesmes focus on specific riddles about the foreign policy strategies of emerging powers like Turkey. While they focus heavily on Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (the BRICS), they attempt to also provide answers to whether the preference of emerging powers is to utilize established institutions or to use parallel and/or competitive mechanisms. The authors also look at the

balance between material interests, status-enhancement, and identity issues as motivators for policy preferences.⁷ In the case of Turkey, its actions in Somalia may largely be explained by its interest in accruing political capital in the form of international prestige. These developed organically and were most likely unintended outcomes, at least initially, in what was at first a humanitarian mission, as demonstrated below.⁸

III. Genesis of Power and Intimidation

A splinter group from *al Islah* (the Somali branch of the Muslim Brotherhood), *Damul Jadiid* (new blood) reportedly worked behind the scenes to elect Hassan Sheikh, an obscure and largely unknown local academic, in 2012.⁹ They were helped in this effort by Qatari money, reportedly secured by Fahad Yasin Tahir, formerly a member of religiously militant Al-Itihad Al-Islami (AIAI), and the Chief of Staff for President Farmajo.¹⁰

After his election, Hassan Sheikh and his *Damul Jadiid* allies sidelined Fahad Yasin (and Fahad's protégé, Farmajo) and cemented their hold on power and monopoly on the use of force and government by assuming key posts in the SFG. These reportedly included the ministries of justice, interior and the minister of state for the presidency.¹¹ By actively being able to utilize the forces at his disposal – his powerful kin (Hawiye), the military, the intelligence services, the treasury and *Damul-Jadid* – the president was by far the most powerful Somali political stakeholder to contest the 2017 presidential race. Furthermore, he was the incumbent – a factor that should have worked for him but, given his track record in power, may have ultimately worked against his reelection chances given anger and frustration on the street and in the diaspora over corruption, mismanagement and paltry economic growth.



Figure 1: President Hassan Sheikh waters the dying tree of Somalia with the blood of Somalis. Source: Adapted from Amin Arts by Amin Amir: <http://www.aminarts.com/>

IV. The Opposition

Until mid-January 2017, the Somali electorate faced a choice between a corrupt current president, Hassan Sheikh; a corrupt and discredited ex-president, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed; and a corrupt prime minister, Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke. This list of choices arguably favored the chances of a viable opposition candidate or pool of contenders who would then nominate a titular candidate. However, Somalia's stakeholders, both in-country and the diaspora, appeared unable to coalesce around or support a particular candidate. That a relative outsider, Farmajo was able to ride a late wave of support had less to do with his populism, clean hands and apparent popularity than with an understanding that none of the other candidates, to include then-President Hassan Sheikh, were viable as the face of a new Somali government – both internally and externally - on account of reportedly massive corruption and mismanagement.¹² There was a palpable sense of anger on the streets of Mogadishu and other major towns and cities in Somalia.¹³ There was also a sense of disenchantment among many in the substantial diaspora communities in London, Toronto and Minneapolis that was informed as much by clan affiliation and politics as

by frustration at Hassan Sheikh's reported penchant of being swayed to whichever side offered the most money.¹⁴

V. Election Funding

Anger on the street and amongst the large diaspora was aggravated as the 2017 presidential election campaign became marred by repeated allegations of vote buying.¹⁵ In a report issued just prior to the election, Marqaati, a Somali corruption watchdog claimed, "The main contenders for the presidency, including the incumbent, Hassan Sheikh, stated that they plan to fight corruption if elected. This is however contradicted by their actions as all are planning to use substantial amounts of money to bribe MPs."¹⁶ Payments of reportedly \$500-\$1000 were made by various presidential candidates to Somali MPs in order to acquire the 20 signatures of MPs required to be listed as a presidential candidate.¹⁷

Once this hurdle was cleared, another round of vote buying got underway, with votes for presidential candidates reportedly costing anywhere from \$50K-\$100K depending on the influence of the MP. But it seems that while many MPs were willing to take money from Hassan Sheikh and consider voting for him, their voting options remained open until the last minute given the possibility that another bribe may have been on offer.¹⁸

This last sentence is crucial to understanding what transpired on February 8, 2017 in Mogadishu. That is, even though Hassan Sheikh had a sizeable reelection war chest at his disposal he was unable to ensure that his bribes resulted in the needed votes to confirm his reelection. It certainly was not for lack of funds. In power since 2012, Hassan Sheikh necessarily had access to the significant resources available to residents of Villa Somalia, the presidential building in Mogadishu. Additionally, he had inked some lucrative tenders, making friends and enemies (inside and outside Somalia) in the process. Foremost among these were the contracts for the running and operation of Mogadishu's international airport and the Port of Mogadishu. Both of these were awarded to Turkish companies with strong ties to the AK Party government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The revenues from the airport and port are estimated to run anywhere between \$11 and \$20 million, per month.¹⁹ Turkey and Turkish companies have been commended for competently upgrading and successfully operating this critical infrastructure. And while the exact figures flowing to Villa

Somalia are uncertain, under the terms of the 20-year port agreement between Turkish firm Al-Bayrak and the Somalia Federal Government (SFG) of Hassan Sheikh, 55% of revenue generated at the seaport will go to the SFG and the remaining 45% to Al-Bayrak.²⁰ This represents the major source of non-aid revenue for the SFG, thus underscoring and enhancing Turkey's critical influence and behind-the-scenes political power in Mogadishu.

None of the opposition candidates running against the president, to include those who appeared to be his closest rivals had access, at least initially, to even a fraction of this revenue stream. Yet Hassan Sheikh did lose the election. In order to understand why, an exploration of pivotal states and their attempts to influence the election is in order.

VI. Turkey

Turkey maintained a stance of strict public neutrality during the period leading up to Somalia's presidential election. But Turkey is a powerful political actor in Somalia. Since 2011, Turkey has made Somalia a major focus of its foreign policy and its presence in Somalia certainly embodies one of the most interesting, but widely misunderstood regional geopolitical developments in the past decade.

Genuine humanitarian concerns, at least initially, drove Turkey's engagement in efforts to alleviate a widespread and devastating famine in 2011-2012.²¹ The prospect of economic gain has played an equally important role in Turkey's developing relationship with Somalia. In the six years spanning 2011-2017, Turkey moved from being an economic footnote in Somalia to its fifth-biggest source of imports.²² Turkey's engagement has been unique in that it is tangible and lasting in the form of hospitals, schools and roads.²³ Less tactile forms of aid such as scholarships, training and diplomatic efforts aimed at fostering political dialogue are targeted, coordinated from Ankara, and largely unilateral in nature.²⁴

As Turkey's initial investments and efforts for influence in Somalia paid off in the form of infrastructure contracts, to include Mogadishu's international airport and its seaport.²⁵ Turkey's control of Somalia's most critical and lucrative infrastructure along with its substantial humanitarian aid necessarily make Turkey an important political actor in Somalia because of the leverage over, and relationship it has, with the SFG.²⁶ Turkey's clout has only grown with the October 2017 opening of a military training facility in Mogadishu.²⁷ This will reportedly

train up to 22,000 members of the Somali National Army and potentially have major ramifications on the broadcast of power by the SFG. This means that Turkey has become one of the most significant actors in the calculations of Somali politicians.²⁸

Given Turkey's significant investment and political leverage in Somalia, Turkey had many reasons to desire the reelection of Hassan Sheikh. The president's favoritism towards Turkey in the form of lucrative contracts was itself a byproduct of Turkey's unilateral, highly personal, and coordinated approach to Somalia.²⁹ Turkey's approach included allegations of bribery and corruption that further enriched Villa Somalia and resulted in Turkish firms winning control of Somalia's two biggest revenue earners, the port and airport. Yet, the president's desire to work with Turkey, as well as Qatar and Egypt (under former president Mohamed Morsi), was reportedly driven by the reorientation of Somalia's foreign policy away from IGAD and the African Union towards the Muslim Brotherhood world preferred by his Damul Jadiid allies and supporters.³⁰ Perhaps most importantly, Qatari money and support for his election as president swayed Hassan Sheikh to be at least initially supportive of Doha's foreign policy aims in Somalia, as discussed in section IX.

Turkey's support of Hassan Sheikh reportedly emanated less from an affinity for the president and more from a wish for continuity and continued access to the levers of Somali power and profit. Ankara realized that a change in leadership could also mean a change to their contracts. This is not without precedent, as Hassan Sheikh's shady award of the airport contract to the Turkish firm Favori, LLC – at the expense of Dubai-based and South African-staffed SKA International Group – could be performed by his successor with a resultant loss to Turkey.³¹

VII. Ethiopia

Ethiopia has played a critically powerful role in Somalia for over a decade.³² It reportedly maintains a network of agents – including current and former SFG officials³³ – and, according to former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, Ethiopian troops control up to 60 percent of Somalia's territory.³⁴ While this may be an exaggeration, Ethiopia does maintain military control throughout much of the country's western and southern regions under the aegis of the regional peacekeeping mission operated by the African Union (AU) with the

approval of the United Nations, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).³⁵ It is also the guarantor of the Jubbaland Compromise Agreement of 2013 that averted a rift between the Jubbaland Administration and the SFG, but effectively means that Ethiopia plays kingmaker in the state capital of Baidoa.³⁶ Ethiopia also supports the de-facto independent but unrecognized Republic of Somaliland, which broke away from Mogadishu in 1991 and was instrumental in lobbying the UAE's DP World to sign a tripartite agreement with Ethiopia and Somaliland for the Berbera Port. This deal effectively sidelined Mogadishu and makes the Balkanization of Somalia almost a *fait accompli*. "Simply put, a weak and fractured Somalia means that Ethiopia can concentrate its attention and forces on quelling persistent internal security difficulties and continuing to isolate and pressure [its arch nemesis] Eritrea."³⁷ It can do so because Addis Ababa need no longer fear a strong, unified Somalia, such as that under former president Mohamed Siad Barre (1969-1991), which successfully fielded an invasion of Ethiopia during the Ogaden War (1977-1978). The advance of SNA troops and those of the West Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) – composed of ethnic Somalis living in the Ogaden in eastern Ethiopia – were only repulsed after the Soviet Union and Cuba intervened on the side of the embattled Marxist regime in Addis Ababa.³⁸ The memory of this near-defeat has informed Ethiopian foreign policy since then and Ethiopia can be said to have taken advantage of the disintegration of Somalia that has occurred as a result of the Somali Civil War. Thus, while Ethiopia may annoy Mogadishu by its machinations in and support of the de-facto independent Republic of Somaliland, Mogadishu, for example, can only fume at Ethiopia's 19 percent stake in the Berbera Port deal.³⁹ However, it is important to remember that prior to official anger (rather than anger on the street) in Mogadishu, the government of Hassan Sheikh rubber-stamped the Berbera Port deal after reportedly receiving payments from Dubai and pressure from Ethiopia.⁴⁰ Given Hassan Sheikh's pliant stance vis-à-vis this deal, his acceptance of the Jubbaland Compromise Agreement and his penchant for being swayed to support the position of the highest bidder, Ethiopia heavily favored his reelection and maintenance of the status quo in Villa Somalia.⁴¹ When Hassan Sheikh lost the election to Farmajo, a populist who unashamedly bashed Ethiopia in his campaign speeches, Ethiopian powerbrokers were reportedly angered and stunned.⁴²

VIII. The United Kingdom

The UK, for reasons of expediency and political capital, wished, like Turkey and Ethiopia, to see Hassan Sheikh remain in power. During his tenure, powerful members of the UK government establishment, to include former Conservative Party leader Lord Michael Howard of Lympne CH, QC were instrumental in a deal signed in August 2013 between the London-based oil company, Soma Oil & Gas, and the SFG to conduct seismic surveys. The deal reportedly involved the payment of hundreds of thousands of dollars to key figures in the SFG by Soma Oil & Gas in return for oil and gas exploration rights.⁴³ Allegations of serious fraud were raised by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea and the UK Serious Fraud Office (SFO) launched an investigation into the deal in mid-2015. The SFO dropped the investigation in late 2016, even though "there were reasonable grounds to suspect the commission of offences involving corruption."⁴⁴

UK citizens were also involved in the so-called Fishguard scandal wherein Mauritius-registered Somalia-Fishguard Ltd., run by former British army soldiers David Walker and Simon Falkner, was given the rights to manage all aspects of Somalia's fishing industry. This included the issuance of fishing permits worth millions of dollars for the rights to fish off Somalia's lengthy coastline.⁴⁵ According to one study, the illegal foreign fishing taking place in Somalia's territorial waters in 2015, for example, was worth an estimated \$306 million a year.⁴⁶

Numerous Britons have reportedly utilized their positions, or been "deployed" from London, to influence and curry favor with Mogadishu. They furthered business contracts and organized conferences in London in order to maintain British influence in the face of stiff competition from Turkey and Turkish businesses as well as to split Somalia from certain Arab states, particularly those in the Gulf and Egypt, in order to expand British economic and political influence by removing competitors.⁴⁷ These have included Hassan Sheikh's PR advisor circa 2013, Richard Bailey, whose salary was reportedly paid by the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO); Deborah (Bella) Bird, the World Bank country director for Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan; and Justin Marozzi, the former PR advisor to Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon. Louise Cottar, variously described as a Horn of Africa expert and low-level advisor to the UN, was personally requested by Hassan Sheikh⁴⁸ to act as a buffer between his administration and the UN Monitoring Group for Somalia and Eritrea coordinated by Jarat Cho-

pra, whose questions and subsequent report incensed Villa Somalia and many powerful Britons alike.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most visible and powerful role has been played by Nicholas Kay, variously the head of the UN's integrated mission to Somalia (UNSOM) and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General (UN SRSG).⁵⁰ The role these individuals played in concert with London was described by one former Somalia government official as "... the most corrupt Europeans... I've ever come in contact with."⁵¹

Given the UK's influence through individuals such as these, as well as its donor contributions and powerful NGO and governmental overseas aid actors such as the Department for International Development (DFID), it has supported initiatives in venues such as the UN that furthered its own agenda as well as those of Hassan Sheikh. For example, the UK offered its support for a UN Security Council agreement to ease a decades-old arms embargo in March 2013, despite serious concerns.⁵²

IX. Qatar

Qatar has played a powerful role in Somalia's politics for over a decade despite its small size and population. However, Qatar's foreign policy impetus and objectives in Somalia are something of a black box. David B. Roberts has argued that Qatar has consistently attempted to distance itself from the long shadow cast by Saudi Arabia.⁵³ It has used its 1992 defense cooperation agreement with the United States, which allows the U.S. military use of Al Udeid Air Base as a tool to discourage any overt meddling by Saudi Arabia. At the same time, its rulers have used the soft power tools at the disposal of their compact, uber-hierarchical, oil-rich state to ensure its indispensability to multiple, powerful states.⁵⁴ Qatar's role has annoyed its close neighbors from time to time⁵⁵ and alarmed regional actors who have borne the brunt of Qatar's mediation and peacekeeping efforts.⁵⁶ However, its actions in support of overt political Islamist actors across the Middle East, particularly post-2011, have made Qatar's position arguably untenable as it reportedly lost control of the very Islamist actors it supported and led directly to the ongoing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis, as noted below.⁵⁷

Regardless of the outcome, Qatar's use of Islamists to further its influence and distance its foreign policy from that of its neighbors is one of the defining factors of its foreign policy. In the case of Somalia,

Qatar's role only began in 2006. Mohamed Hussein Gaas presciently noted that prior to that time, Qatar possessed no local connections or legitimacy.⁵⁸ However, with the rise of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), their short-lived rule and the subsequent atomization of Islamist movements in Somalia, Qatar began to seriously engage with various Islamist factions and former UIC members, attempting to influence politics through personal and religious networks and, crucially, members of the Somali diaspora. "Often Qatar's support [to its allies] was via Islamist linkages. This reflected a certain practicality given existing connections the Qatari elite had across the region. Equally, [Qatar's ruler] and his advisors were also content to support and empower a broad range of Islamists, not least because they believed the time for moderate Islam to play a role in regional politics had arrived. Consequently, they reasoned, supporting such a movement early on would be a savvy political gamble for Qatar."⁵⁹ Indeed, influential diaspora members reportedly negotiated the arrival of some of the UIC leadership, to include Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, to Qatar after Ethiopia invaded Somalia and ended the UIC's rule. Sheikh Sharif was feted in Doha after his arrival in 2007, to include an interview with Al Jazeera.⁶⁰

Sheikh Sharif was subsequently elected in 2009, possibly with the assistance of significant Qatari funding, but fell out with Doha when it insisted on expanding the government to include violent Islamists such as Hassan Dahir Aweys and his *Hisbul Islam*. By 2012, Qatar had dropped Sheikh Sharif in favor of a little-known academic, Hassan Sheikh, who was promptly elected, reportedly with Fahad Yasin's assistance in the form of Qatari monetary support.⁶¹

During his tenure, Hassan Sheikh alienated himself from Fahad Yasin and Qatar by refusing to appoint Farmajo, someone who both Doha and their ally in Mogadishu, Fahad Yasin, assessed could influence Hassan Sheikh to make decisions in their favor. Doha withdrew its support for Hassan Sheikh and instead supported Farmajo in the 2017 presidential election with money again couriered from Doha by Fahad Yasin.⁶² Qatari money and Fahad Yasin's organizational support proved absolutely critical to the outcome resulting in Farmajo's election. For example, Fahad Yasin reportedly recruited key defectors and insiders from Hassan Sheikh's administration such as Hassan Ali Kheyre, Thabit Mohamed, Jamal Mohamed Hassan, and Mustaf Dhuxulow.⁶³ From his base at the Jazeera Hotel in Mogadishu, Fahad Yasin was reportedly provided with secret and sensitive information

by these individuals that informed the timing and direction of bribery payments to Somali politicians casting their votes.⁶⁴

Interestingly, Qatar's role in Somalia, given its role as kingmaker for the past two presidents, remains largely invisible beyond money and key Somali allies. This separates it from Turkey's visible and overt role of port and airport operator, military training facilitator, and its plethora of humanitarian and business actors operating in and around the capital. Indeed, Turkey's and Qatar's roles in Somalia, while perhaps complimentary by nature, have not until recently been so by design despite divergent arguments and misleading hyperbole.⁶⁵ Indeed, perceptions to the contrary that see Turkey's and Qatar's role in Somalia as lock-step are informed by analysis and commentary on the GCC crisis which erupted in June 2017. Pitting Qatar against the KSA, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, developments in Somalia are viewed through the lens of this crisis. Given that Qatar's and Turkey's involvement in Somalia began at different times and for very different reasons, they thus should not be viewed as having always been (and perhaps not even now) mutually constitutive or supportive.

X. Italy

Italy's desire to affect change in Somalia can be said to be motivated by a combination of colonial nostalgia,⁶⁶ a desire to influence events beyond Italy, control of offshore oil and gas blocks and, to a lesser degree, making Somalia a stronger destination market for Italian goods.⁶⁷ To this end, Italy attempted to influence the 2017 election in Somalia in its favor by leveraging its European Union (EU) role. Italy was able to exert large amounts of control over EU policy vis-à-vis Somalia because of its "colonial expertise" embodied in the role played by Michele Cervone d'Urso, EU Special Envoy and first EU Ambassador for Somalia.⁶⁸ Thus, by effectively guiding EU policy vis-à-vis Somalia and directing the EU's significant financial aid in country, Italy has punched above its weight both in Somalia and at international conferences and meetings on Somalia. It also reportedly has consistently fed the EU information that was necessarily colored by Italian bias, arguably influencing EU policy and priorities.⁶⁹

Given its importance, leverage and gravitas, Italy attempted to convince regional powers such as the UAE and Ethiopia that Hassan Sheikh's choice for Prime Minister, Omar Abdirashid Sharmarke was a viable candidate.⁷⁰ While there is little evidence that Italy's choice of

candidate ever held any sway in Addis Ababa it did play a role in Abu Dhabi's political calculations, as discussed in the next section. Italian politicians reportedly liked Omar Abdirashid for two reasons. First, he was not Hassan Sheikh and thus offered Italy a chance to reassert itself within the ruling elite structure of Mogadishu, a role that had increasingly been swallowed up by Turkey over the course of Hassan Sheikh's tenure. Second, Omar Abdirashid likely supported Italian exploratory oil blocks – granted by Kenya to Italian multinational oil and gas company ENI S.p.A. – off the coast of Somalia and Kenya.⁷¹ Evidence of Italy's favoritism for Omar was evidenced by a series of high-level meetings in Rome and an official state visit with Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi in May 2016. This dovetailed rather neatly with Renzi's public declaration to re-engage with Africa and ENI's commitment to invest \$20 billion in Africa in the four years from 2016.⁷²

Italy became increasingly concerned over the moves made by Hassan Sheikh's administration to change the maritime border of Kenya and Somalia. The government of Hassan Sheikh insisted that Somalia's maritime border with Kenya should be drawn in a southeasterly direction following the same line as the Kenya-Somalia border as it meets the Indian Ocean (rather than stretching due east as Kenya insists). When Somalia took Kenya to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2015,⁷³ Italian politicians and oil interests were alarmed given ENI's outstanding blocks in the Indian Ocean were now in jeopardy should the ICJ rule in favor of Somalia. As Fasil Amdetsion noted, "Perhaps no Italian company better epitomizes opacity in its operations, and intertwinement of state and corporate interests, than ENI... The Italian government is a major shareholder in ENI, and ENI too has long had a revolving door between its business and government."⁷⁴ Indeed, Renzi baldly noted on national television "ENI is a fundamental component of our energy policy, our foreign policy, our intelligence policy. By intelligence, I mean our secret services."⁷⁵

Given the amount of state and industry collusion and deep fiscal and strategic interests offshore in the Horn of Africa region, Italy threw its support to Omar Abdirashid. It did so because of the role he had previously played as Prime Minister under the former TFG President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. During his tenure, Omar ordered the then Minister of Planning and International Cooperation, Abdirahman Abdishakur Warsame to sign a controversial memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Kenya. This MoU reportedly renounced Somalia's claims to the now contested maritime border by affirming

the status quo. Indeed, Kenya has pointed strategically to this MoU as proof of its sovereignty over the disputed areas when it awarded contracts to ENI and other oil majors accordingly.⁷⁶ Thus, Italy's desire to maintain the maritime status quo led directly to their support of Omar.

XI. The United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE reportedly tried to influence Somalia's presidential election but ultimately failed in its bid to locate a suitable candidate. The UAE's support for Somalia, particularly in the humanitarian and development arenas, as well as its efforts in fighting terrorism, has played an important, if relatively minor role for over one decade.⁷⁷ However, its role is not without controversy. The UAE was reportedly responsible for paying the salaries of at least some units of the Somali National Army (SNA) from late 2015 until early 2018.⁷⁸ Yet allegations of non-payment to SNA officers and staff date to late 2015. As one anti-corruption report noted in early 2017, "Salary payments for most units of the Somali National Army (SNA) were discontinued in late 2015; although, until mid-2016, some units continued receiving stipends that was [sic] not paid for by the Somali government..."⁷⁹ According to the report, "The reason for non-payment of salaries is not because of a lack of money – tax collections are at \$180M p/a according to the former state minister of finance – but because of the elections. State resources, including taxes and public property that was sold off, were plundered in order to finance members of the ruling party running for parliament, and the president's own election."⁸⁰ This leads to the assumption that either a) the UAE delivered the money to the SFG for payment of the SNA's salaries but that it was stolen by the SFG, or b) that the UAE did not deliver the money, or c) that the UAE reached a deal with the SFG whereby the funds earmarked for the SNA were utilized for other purposes. Of the three scenarios, the first seems the most plausible given reports that SNA salaries were actually paid by a third party in 2016.



Figure 2: “The political fate of Somalia.” Somali opposition figures, to include Omar Abdirashid (on his knees, third from left), flock to the UAE for support and money. Turkish President Erdoğan holds President Hassan Sheikh in his arms and attempts to bring Ethiopia (far right) along. Source: Adapted from Amin Arts by Amin Amir: <http://www.aminarts.com/>

Regarding the 2017 presidential elections, the UAE initially supported the incumbent but reportedly offered parallel support to former TFG president Sheikh Sharif⁸¹ before switching, circa October 2016 and based on Italian advice, to another individual they deemed a more viable candidate, then-current Prime Minister Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke. Abu Dhabi's interest in electing Omar Abdirashid was reportedly threefold. One, by removing Hassan Sheikh from power, Qatar's influence and that of the Muslim Brotherhood – in the form of the Turkish AK Party and Hassan Sheikh's Damul Jadiid – would be minimized.⁸² Two, a new president, pliant to the wishes of and reliant on the UAE, would potentially abrogate existing agreements with Turkey thereby paving the way for UAE-based firms such as DP World and SKA to claim (or reclaim) the port and airport, respectively.⁸³ Three, there are indications that pressure from the UAE's ambassador to Somalia, Mohammed Ahmed Othman Al Hammadi, led to Omar's designation as a viable and suitably pliant candidate.⁸⁴ Operating from Nairobi, the ambassador may have developed a positive impression of Omar Abdirashid because of his position and resulting patronage network as Prime Minister, his previous position as Prime Minister under

TFG President Sheikh Sharif and, importantly, by Italian support for Omar Abdirashid's candidacy.⁸⁵

The UAE became so interested in Omar that they invited him and approximately 20 other Somali politicians to Abu Dhabi in late October 2016 in an effort to galvanize support for Omar's presidential bid through the distribution of money.⁸⁶ Yet rather than returning to Somalia and attempting to construct a viable electoral strategy around Omar, the politicians (and Omar) reportedly pocketed the money for their own personal use and political endeavors.⁸⁷ After this failure, Abu Dhabi reportedly reverted to their dual-track support of both Hassan Sheikh and Sheikh Sharif. While this strategy may appear schizophrenic, it was indicative of the UAE's attempts to hedge and balance in the face of an uncertain electoral outcome in order to maintain and possibly grow the UAE's limited influence, and to wring electoral promises from both candidates in favor of the UAE. For example, during the election Hassan Sheikh referred to the UAE as a "permanent strategic ally" and pledged he would "ensure that relationship between the two countries flourish to the maximum if he's re-elected."⁸⁸

By investing in Hassan Sheikh, in particular, the UAE hoped to prise the winning candidate away from Turkey and Qatar and make him their man in Mogadishu. With the benefit of hindsight however, the UAE's choice of candidates appears to have been flawed and unduly influenced by Italian prognostications. Omar Abdirashid, Hassan Sheikh and Sheikh Sharif were all known quantities in Somalia having all spent time in office marred by allegations of corruption and score-settling. They were therefore unpopular on the street as well as with donors. While this would not normally make much difference in a closed and patently unfair election, the 2017 election was conducted against the backdrop of significant anger against the perceived excesses of Hassan Sheikh and his regime, and populist language by candidates such as Farmajo aimed at foreign influence and meddling, particularly Ethiopian, proved a powerful mobilizer.

XII. The United States

The elephant in the Somalia election room was the United States. The feeling among many Somali politicians and diaspora stakeholders just prior to the 2017 election was that should the US get involved behind one candidate or a group of candidates, Hassan Sheikh's days in office

would quickly be over. The US had many reasons to dislike Hassan Sheikh, to include US anger at unsavory deals done with UK politicians and businesses such as Soma,⁸⁹ rampant corruption at Villa Somalia, and alleged collusion with al-Shabaab. Yet US Somalia policy was and remains hamstrung by multiple variables, with two factors reigning supreme. First, the US does not really have a Somalia policy beyond security and the provision of security-related aid. This is largely motivated by what could be termed the Horn of Africa counterterrorism soup du jour: al-Shabaab. Second, the 2016 US election introduced a high degree of uncertainty into an already moribund and second-tier US foreign policy imperative. With the election of Donald Trump and confusion over administration priorities, US policies and strategies in a corner of Africa that many in Washington would prefer to forget were further de-emphasized. US ambassadors to Somalia, from their base in Nairobi, have failed to achieve much leverage in Mogadishu.⁹⁰ US government day-to-day operations in Somalia have similarly been handicapped by personnel leaving their posts citing frustration and personal reasons.⁹¹ They also seem to have curried little traction with certain members of the SFG who pejoratively referred to former US Political Counselor for Somalia Affairs Bob Patterson as “simplistic” and former US Political Counselor for Somalia Affairs Cheryl Sim as the “loud American.”⁹² Given electoral uncertainty and a lack of continuity in both policy and personnel, America’s interest in the outcome of the 2017 election was low.

XIII. Conclusion

Much has been made of the outsider status of Farmajo, a reputation that he and his allies, notably Fahad Yasin, broadcast effectively to the electorate on the street. Yet it is important to highlight that Farmajo is a known quantity inside Somalia and with the Somali diaspora. Farmajo returned to Somalia and served briefly as Prime Minister in 2010 under President Sheikh Sharif.⁹³ According to some reports Farmajo appears to have carried out his brief tenure well, reportedly paying overdue stipends to government soldiers and requiring cabinet members disclose their assets.⁹⁴ Yet this is contradicted by Abdirazak Fartaag’s detailed report demonstrating Farmajo’s shady financial dealings with Sheikh Sharif and other government officials while in office, thus tarnishing his “clean hands” image.⁹⁵ Despite his corrupt practices while in office, Farmajo did resign in mid-2011 in protest over what he saw as politi-

cal machinations by Sheikh Sharif to remain in power. His resignation was met with street protests in Mogadishu and in cities with diaspora populations such as Toronto.⁹⁶ Bucking the trend for most Somali politicians, Farmajo left office relatively popular, thus helping his chances in 2017.⁹⁷

Farmajo was considered a viable candidate simply because the other main candidates with real chances of election, Sheikh Sharif and Omar Abdirashid, were considered almost as toxic as Hassan Sheikh. Their viability depended almost entirely on clan political calculations and their ability to bribe voters. In the case of Hassan Sheikh, his access to money via the SFG as well as counting on the support of Turkey, Ethiopia and the UK made him the candidate to beat. But Hassan Sheikh had his weaknesses. He was notoriously and publicly corrupt, thus earning the ire of the Somali street. Additionally, he had incurred the wrath of certain powerful members of his own sub-clan.

The fact that Farmajo was not Hassan Sheikh is one of the compelling reasons he may have won the final vote for president. But it is not the only reason. The Somali street, as discussed, played a role in the election, but only insofar as channeling votes away from Hassan Sheikh and other candidates with track records in power and in voicing their opposition to Ethiopian meddling in Somalia affairs. Farmajo's populism and his verbal barbs aimed at both corrupt SFG ministers and Ethiopian powerbrokers in Somalia met with approval inside and outside Somalia, drawing as they did on grievances that cross clan and gender lines. Yet the men and women of Mogadishu, Barawe, Garowe and Kismayo did not vote, of course. That was left up to the men of power and privilege at the voting hall inside Mogadishu's Airport compound. And while evidence seems to demonstrate that they did heed popular calls for an end to overt Ethiopian meddling in Somali affairs by voting for Farmajo, the anti-Ethiopian candidate, their votes were cast based on the amount of money candidates could deliver and this depended, to a large degree, on how involved and supportive outside powers chose to be in relation to the election.

Hassan Sheikh's election war chest dwarfed the other candidates – even Farmajo's with his access to Qatari money via Fahad Yasin. However, Hassan Sheikh reportedly had miscalculated by not paying the salaries of various civil servants over the preceding years, thus costing him the support of key members of parliament and other voting members. Farmajo was able to count on Qatar's financial and political support as well as Fahad Yasin's organizational acumen at a critical

juncture.⁹⁸ Turkey remained overtly neutral throughout the process and there is no indication that Ankara provided money directly to Hassan Sheikh specifically for his reelection. Ethiopia remained convinced that Hassan Sheikh would prevail given his incumbency and material power, but gravely miscalculated. The UK, in the person of Michael Keating managed over \$6 million in funds to assist in registration and other expenses, but London appears to have either been caught off guard by Farmajo's chances or, more likely, their fears were assuaged by the promise that Hassan Ali Khaire—a dual Somali and Norwegian citizen, former regional director for the Norwegian Refugee Council, and executive director for Africa for Soma Oil and Gas—would be chosen as Farmajo's Prime Minister.⁹⁹ The US possessed the clout and resources to have significantly affected the 2017 elections in Mogadishu but, as noted, remained mired in its own presidential race and the uncertainty that accompanied the election of Donald Trump.

Italy failed in its choice to significantly influence the direction and choices of Villa Somalia when it threw its support to Omar Abdirashid, yet it is doubtful that Rome would have offered the amounts of money to Omar that wealthier actors such as Qatar were offering to their candidates.¹⁰⁰ Italy's choice of candidate also affected the UAE's political calculations vis-à-vis Somalia. This has had some serious implications for Abu Dhabi's foreign policy in the Horn of Africa where the GCC crisis appears to be playing out in worrisome detail. The Berbera Port deal between Ethiopia, the de-facto independent Republic of Somaliland and DP World reportedly incensed powerful interests in Mogadishu who view Somalia as a unitary state and one that should be ruled from Mogadishu. That Qatar's choice of candidate, Farmajo as well as their man in Mogadishu, Fahad Yasin now occupy Villa Somalia has only complicated matters and some see the hand of Qatar and possibly Turkey in the April 2018 SFG's seizure of UAE diplomatic cargo worth over \$9 million and the resulting rupture in diplomatic relations between the UAE and Somalia. If this is indeed the case, nothing better demonstrates the importance and the grave consequences of rising powers jockeying for position in the Horn of Africa.

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82. The UAE's and, indeed, the GCC's (Qatar excepted) pathological fear of the Muslim Brotherhood is perhaps second only to that of Shiite Iran. See Hedges, M., & Cafiero, G. (2017). The GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood: What Does the Future Hold?. *Middle East Policy*, 24(1), 129-153. See also Freer, C. (2016). Is the UAE's fear of the Muslim Brotherhood driving its Yemen strategy?. *Middle East Centre Blog*.
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90. The U.S. ambassador to Somalia Stephen Schwartz resigned citing personal reasons after just over one year in the job in September 2017. He was based in Nairobi because the US does not currently operate an embassy in Mogadishu. His predecessor, Katherine Dhanani, never held the post because she withdrew her nomination by the Obama administration citing personal reasons. Mohamed Olad Hassan. (2017, October 6). US Ambassador to Somalia Resigns. *VOA*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-ambassador-to-somalia-resigns/4060081.html>
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93. Farmajo is a former Commissioner for Equal Employment at the New York State Department of Transportation in Buffalo and a US citizen. He was reportedly chosen because of his youth and previous experience at Somalia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A less charitable explanation was that Farmajo, as an outsider and member of the Darod clan, would be pliant to Sheikh Sharif's wishes and those of Sheikh Sharif's Hawiye clan and, more specifically, Abgaal sub-clan. See Al-Jazeera. (2010, October 15). Somali president appoints new PM. *Al-Jazeera*. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2010/10/20101014151118984278.html>
94. Security Council Meeting on Somalia. (2011, January 14). *Statement by H.E. Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Prime Minister of Somalia*. http://www.somaliweyn.org/pages/news/Jan_11/15Jan18.html
95. See pages 17-20,31-34,70,85,105 and 129 in Fartaag, Abdirazak. (2014). *Their Own Worst Enemy: How Successive Governments Plundered Somalia's Public Resources and Why the World Looked On*. *Fartaag Consulting*, Online at fartaagconsulting.com/publications.html.
96. Ibrahim, Mohammed. (2011, June 10). More Clashes in Somalia; Minister Is Killed. *New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/11/world/africa/11somalia.html>
97. Farmajo returned to Buffalo but remained involved in Somali politics, founding the Tayo ("Quality") political party in 2012 and running unsuccessfully for president of Somalia that same year. In the run-up to the 2017 presidential vote, Farmajo emerged early on as a key figure in the various opposition movements arrayed against President Hassan Sheikh. Yet he was reportedly unable to gain the political backing of any significant group or clan, to include his own Darod clan, until just prior to election-day. The

reasons for this are complex and related to the power politics driven by Somali clan politics as well as the actions (and resources) of regional actors. See Africa Confidential Staff. (2017). MPs reject foreigners' choice. *Africa Confidential* 58(4), 8-10.

98. Jacquelyn Meyer Kantack. (2017, September 26) The Gulf Contest for the Horn of Africa. *Critical Threats*. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-gulf-contest-for-the-horn-of-africa>

99. Hassan Ali Khaire resigned from his post at Soma Oil and Gas but his ties to the organization and the UK remain worrisome. See Mohamed Ibrahim. (2017, February 23). Hassan Ali Khaire, an Oil Executive, Is Picked to Be Somalia's Prime Minister. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/23/world/africa/hassan-ali-khaire-somalia-prime-minister.html>

100. Farmajo's electoral success during the first round (he came in second to Hassan Sheikh) reportedly occurred because the majority of Farmajo's own sub-clan voted for him. As importantly, Omar Abdirashid's sub-clan voted for Farmajo and against Omar. As such, Omar had to concede the race and opened up the possibility of Farmajo's electoral victory against Hassan Sheikh.